

Staffing Shortages on Main Street Ava Garderet

Seal Beach, “Mayberry-By-The-Sea”, is a magnetic destination for tourists seeking a quiet but charming coastal town, and a significant part of its appeal for visitors is the charismatic, bustling Main Street. It offers a fabulous array of restaurants, boutique clothing stores and antique gift shops that pull visitors in as they stroll towards the pier and beach... and before the coronavirus arrived, it was booming. As everyone knows all too well, the past nearly two years have been marked by waves of varying levels of restrictions and precautions in lieu of the pandemic, and these shifts have affected our local economy and businesses in addition to our personal and social lives. To gain a better understanding of these struggles from an insider’s perspective, I interviewed a few local business owners on Main Street and though each had their own experiences, I noticed some similarities in their answers.

Unsurprisingly, business owners reported struggling with their customer to worker ratios since the start of the pandemic. Ashley Newell from Beach Fitness reported that their ratio is pretty proportional at the moment, but only because they barely have any clients, and once more people start coming in they will quickly become short staffed. “Ideally,” she said, “We want to see all of our numbers go up at the same time.” Rob Jahncke, owner of Javitinis, reported having a different experience, telling me that he was often forced to overwork the staff he did still have because, in the coffee shop, demand never really slowed down. He commented on this phenomenon, saying “What I noticed was that even the people who were cautious about eating out at restaurants were still willing to come to the coffee house.” He pondered that perhaps his customers were less hesitant because the cafe offered an easier in and out with lower contact in and out (especially with our online ordering/curbside pickup), or maybe because they saw it as their little “treat” in a time when we had to sacrifice so much.

Another common issue for these business owners was dealing with a lack of work ethic in their employees. At Javitini’s, Rob found it strange that none of the employees who left permanently, some even relocating out of state, gave a reason for their sudden absence, leaving him to wonder whether it was fear of COVID exposure, the longer shifts he was forced to assign, or something unrelated that drew them away. Silvana Marroche, owner of Forest Nymph, was bothered by the lack of work ethic she has encountered in her past few employees. She gave the example of the employee that was supposed to work the day of our interview who simply didn’t show up – without any notice or reason – for the second time in the last couple of weeks. “I pay well, offer great perks and am super flexible on slow days (even allowing my college aged employees to bring their ipads/etc to work), so I’m not sure what the problem is – maybe I don’t micromanage *enough*?”

Lastly, we discussed the hiring process. Most of the business owners tried using online outreach like Indeed and other social media platforms, but found that those methods became complicated and expensive, and often not particularly effective. They reported that using personal websites or connections through word of mouth was much more successful because it reached people who were already interested in the business, rather than strangers who were

only motivated to apply because it allowed them to check the box saying that they are in the process of “looking for a job” on another form.

As we conducted these interviews, I tried to brainstorm solutions. One idea was to set up a job fair, an event for all businesses on Main Street that are looking to put their name out there on the job market. Each business would have a table where they could arrange a representation of their products/services and have potential employees approach them to learn more about the position. All of the interviewees agreed that a job fair would be a wonderful idea, with Silvana adding that the face to face approach would allow the employers to gauge the “fit” of the person with the business better than any online application could. Although online platforms proved to be less successful for the hiring process, they could be an effective way to publicize the event beyond the reach of word of mouth. As we move forward in the new year, we should all brainstorm ways to support our local businesses, not only as customers but as passionate employees.